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ESP serial publications before *The ESP Journal/English for Specific Purposes*: Recollections and reflections of an old-timer

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ABSTRACT

The ESP Journal, the first peer-reviewed international journal in our field, was launched in 1980, thus making it 40 years old in 2020. This short article explores the years immediately before 1980 and attempts to explain the factors that led to the emergence of the journal. These included major ESP projects funded mainly in OPEC countries, the role of the British Council, the first major generation of ESP/EST textbooks, the first collections of ESP papers, and the production of local ESP newsletters. Pride of place here belongs to *The ESP Newsletter* and *EST Clearinghouse* from Oregon State University and under the Editorship and Management of Karl Drobnic. In effect, during those years the field was rapidly coming of age.

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1. Background

The ESP Journal, which soon became *English for Specific Purposes*, was first edited by Grace Mancill of the English Language Institute at the American University in Washington, D.C. The first issue appeared in fall, 1980, which makes the journal forty years old in 2020. Dr Mancill was assisted by Carol Romett of her own unit and by Karl Drobnic of Oregon State University and of whom we are going to hear considerably more. The American University held the copyright, which it retained long after the journal itself had been acquired by Pergamon/Elsevier Science. The emergence of a peer-reviewed international serial with an editorial advisory board consisting of well-known figures in the field such as Christopher Candlin, Ann Johns, Larry Selinker and Henry Widdowson was not entirely accidental.

In the 1960s ESP was essentially English for Science and Technology and was undertaken by few individuals or very small groups in widely-scattered places. These would include the University of Santiago in Chile, the University of Libya in Tripoli, and the University of Washington in the U.S.A. However, the 1970s saw several rapid and important developments. OPEC countries, much encouraged by the West, invested heavily in the transfer of technology, especially in higher education—a kind of "aid" which Benesch and others have criticized (Benesch, 2001). The British Council became an important broker of ESP projects and funded several of its English Language Officers to undertake doctorates, a number of which had an ESP focus. An example of the former was the large British Council project to provide in 1975 an extensive ESP program for King Abdullah Aziz University in Saudi Arabia, and of the latter John Munby and his subsequent book, *Communicative Syllabus Design* (Munby, 1978). Other major ESP programs were at Tabriz in Iran, Aramco in Saudi Arabia, the University of Kuwait, and the University of Khartoum, especially after the establishment of the English Language Servicing Unit in 1974.

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In this period a fair number of ESP/EST textbooks were launched by UK publishers, which are listed below in chronological order:

J.R. Ewer & G. Latorre (1969) *A Course in Basic Scientific English*
J. Swales (1971) *Writing Scientific English*
J. P. B. Allen & H. G. Widdowson (1974) *English in Physical Science* (plus later volumes in the *Focus* series)
M. Bates & T. Dudley-Evans (1976) *Nucleus General Science* (plus later volumes in the *Nucleus* series)

A fourth development was the appearance of collections of ESP papers, one of which was published by a major international educational publisher (Mackay & Mountford, 1978).

All these operations (ESP contracts and other forms of support, specialized training, textbook publishing, and collections) essentially followed a center-periphery model (Schon, 1983) with communications to and from those "in the field" with "headquarters" in the UK or USA. As a result, ESP practitioners knew little of what their counterparts were doing in similar circumstances in other countries. So, attempts began to be made to do something about this at a grass-roots level by producing newsletters and bulletins about their ESP activities and, hopefully, those of others elsewhere. *The ESP/EST Newsletter of Chile* was one of the first to appear, but its life was cut short by the untimely death of Jack Ewer in a climbing accident. The large ARAMCO English Language Center in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia had a regular newsletter, although it mostly covered general English. The Language Centre at University of Kuwait produced an occasional ESP newsletter. Another newsletter with regional ambitions was the *ESPMENA Bulletin* (English for Specific Purposes in the Middle East and North Africa) from ELSU at the University of Khartoum. However, since I have already written about this last one on more than one occasion (Swales, 1988; 2012), I will not say anything more about it here. There was one other newsletter that I largely ignored in *Episodes in ESP* (1988) and I would like to make amends for this neglect in the remainder of this short piece—in fact, to offer belated justice to an important academic and professional achievement. In so doing I have been much enlightened by a recent email correspondence with Karl Drobnic, its founding editor and the creator of the EST Clearinghouse. In addition, I possess bound annual copies of the first eight years, except for Volume III, which is unaccountably missing.

2. English for science and technology (later English for Specific Purposes)

This newsletter and Clearinghouse were produced by the ELI at Oregon State University in Corvallis. The first of the many monthly issues appeared in April 1977, was typed and duplicated and consisted of four densely-packed 8" x 11" pages. It opens with an editorial by Karl Drobnic, the first paragraph of which is reproduced below:

> This first issue of the EST Newsletter comes to you through funding granted by the AID/NAFSA Liaison Committee to establish an English for Science and Technology Clearinghouse and Newsletter. To borrow directly from the grant proposal, it is the purpose of the Clearinghouse and Newsletter to:
>
> a. Collect research in EST, both published and unpublished.
> b. Solicit descriptions of EST teaching methodologies.
> c. Publicize the importance of EST within the discipline of ESL.
> d. Serve as a resource distribution center.
>
> With these objectives in mind, you are all invited to help build the Clearinghouse by submitting descriptions of what you are doing in the area of EST/ESL. We will publish as much of this material as possible and see that it gets distributed to others with like interests.

So, I asked Karl about obtaining a grant form US AID/NAFSA (NAFSA stands for National Association of Foreign Student Advisors). Here is most of his reply:

> We had a faculty member… on the AID/NAFSA Liaison committee. She knew I was trying to find resources and experts in EST. We had just had a challenging experience with a program of 20 Libyan students who were sent by Colonel Quadaffi to study nuclear engineering at Oregon State University. Terms of the contract were that the students take university level math and chemistry at the same time they were in ESL classes. The students were "cream of the crop", selected from the top ranks of the Libyan high school leaving exam… The contract gave them six months to finish ESL classes and get full admission to the university. … Happy ending: we eventually got all the Libyans into the university, but not in six months. So I wrote a proposal for the EST Clearinghouse and Newsletter, and with [my colleague's] sponsorship, it got funded. There were several other grants made also, so it was competitive in the sense that the committee was simply looking for good ideas, not particularly for EST or ESP projects.

The first issue appeared in April 1977 and, broadly speaking, set the stage for future ones. There was a section entitled "Bibliography of Current Clearinghouse Materials". Nearly all of these bibliographic items in the first issue emanated from research conducted by "The Washington School" of ESP (principally by John Lackstrom, Larry Selinker and Louis Trimble). Karl

explained that this came about as a result of his driving up to Seattle meeting with the Trimbles and Louis giving him a bunch of papers for the Clearinghouse as well as a small list of addresses. Another feature, which will become regular, was a listing of upcoming papers or workshops at conferences. A speaker listed in the first issue will be very familiar to readers of *English for Specific Purposes*:

NAFSA, May 24-7, New Orleans	"Teaching Written Scientific and Technical English" Ann Johns May 26 Workshop

In addition, there was an editorial, requests for learning and teaching materials and for book reviews, and extracts or abstracts of relevant articles and theses.

My second email question asked him how he and later Kathryn Michaels managed to produce 12 issues a year for at least eight years. His long and enlightening response reflected something of the pioneering *zeitgeist* of that time:

> Early on, I made the decision that the newsletter would be "cafeteria" style - here's what's available, take what you want from it. It was consciously non-judgmental in the early going. If someone was willing to submit a description of what he/she was doing, I'd publish it in the newsletter, and if appropriate, lodge it in the Clearinghouse for dissemination. The intent was to foster communication. I knew there were fugitive papers looking for a home, and people working in isolation. The goal was to create a network so people knew to look for each other at conferences, and facilitate exchange of like-minded materials. So the material for the newsletter flowed in, and most of the job was cut and paste. I'd paste up a mock-up of the issue. The grant paid for a skilled typist, who then typed it up to send to printing. I tried to get everything in that had come in during that month, so the attitude that I hope came through was "inclusion". That encouraged more people to contribute.

The second issue was considerably longer because of its inclusion of several extracts from the Teaching and Learning Materials from *ESPMENA Bulletin. Inter alia*, the third includes the five-paragraph abstract of Barbara Wiggins' MA thesis, *Syntax and Discourse: An approach to the Teaching of Scientific English*. Below is the first paragraph:

> Scientific English is of interest to ESL teachers and materials developer as an important variety of written English. The myriad approaches to its study in an ESL context have included vocabulary exercises, translation, and grammar drills on structures most commonly found in scientific English prose. The problem with these approaches is that they have not considered scientific rose contextually and have thus not been productive of a cogent pedagogical theory based on the discourse structure of scientific English.

It is worth drawing attention to the prescient closing phrase of this paragraph—"a cogent pedagogical theory based on the discourse structure of scientific English".

Issue #5 (August 1977) closed with a complete bibliography of items that had been collected in the Clearinghouse files. These articles, scripted conference talks (we read our talks in those days!), ESP surveys and project descriptions now numbered over thirty items and had been deposited over just five months. Issue # 8 (November) was the first guest-edited special and was the forerunner of what become an occasional series. Here is what Karl wrote about this:

> Later, we went to special issues, turning the newsletter over to other organizations to showcase their efforts. That was a conscious attempt to emulate the best of university traditions – the free exchange of information, and it also eased the burden of 12 issues/year.

The guest-editor was Ron Mackay of Concordia University in Montreal and he would become a founding member of the editorial board of *English for Specific Purposes* where he was active for a fair number of years. The issue was devoted to ESP in Canada. In his opening editorial, he mentions among other things that his own university is now offering two graduate courses, one on "Syllabus Planning and Materials Development", the other on "English for Specific Purposes". These might well be two of the first such courses anywhere. The first and longest piece by Bruce Dewing and Noel Schutz is entitled "Gathering information on ESP needs in the Republic of China" and closes with three recommendations:

1) To continue the diagnostic testing of professional scientists and engineers
2) To isolate the specific problem areas in representative scientific texts
3) To supplement reading exercises with "communication" drills

Perhaps only the third recommendation would raise eyebrows over 40 years later.

Next up is Bernard Mohan, a well-known authority on language education from the University of British Columbia. Here is his short closing paragraph:

> Although each volume in an E.S.P. series deals with a different field of activity, the series often has a common format and structure. I suggest that this commonality is based, to a considerable extent, on similarities in genre across the different fields of activity, and that this gives a rough indication of the place and importance of genre in E.S.P.

It has been said (by myself as well as several others) that the concept of genre was first introduced into English for Specific Purposes, independently of each other, by Swales (1981) and by Tarone, Dwyer, Gillette, and Icke (1981). It now seems that credit for the innovation really belongs to Bernard Mohan for his use of it in his 1977 TESOL presentation and subsequently published in the proceedings.

The following piece by Joan Pavelich, also of UBC, has the intriguing title of "Adapting technical writing classes to women". She points out that at the time of writing very few women were enrolling for the professional degrees at UBC, apart from pharmacy. Even so, the introductory technical writing course "tries to encourage women to enter these masculine faculties and trains them for the skills necessary for success there". Not surprisingly then the available materials have been written by men for men. So the course starts with "a typical how-to-find-a job" unit. The focus is placed on summer employment and the female students are encouraged to apply for jobs long considered the purview of men, such as truck driver or lifeguard. Students are required to actually apply for next summer's job and the grade is withheld until the students hand in one employer's reply, where positive or negative. The remaining three pieces concern business English for francophones, English for survival, and a report on the ESP operation at Concordia. The 12-page issue closes with a list of 24 Canadian papers made available through the EST clearinghouse, presumably assembled by the guest-editor.

The last two extracts from *English for Science and Technology*, as it then was, are taken from Karl Drobnic's editorial for Issue #13 (April, 1978):

> ESP/EST was a constant theme of the 1978 TESOL Convention in Mexico. Workshops, colloquia, papers and plenary sessions all devoted attention to various aspects of the movement and served to establish ESP as a dominating force on the North American ESL scene. ….
>
> About forty people attended the Clearinghouse report on Wednesday night, and it was only the next day that we learnt that half again as many people were left standing in the hall due to a malfunctioning entrance door. In keeping with its policy of communication, the Clearinghouse kept its report short and devoted most of the time to getting those in attendance talking to each other.

But this is not quite the last word from Karl because at the end of my string of queries, I asked him if he would like to add anything else, to which he responded with:

> Persons today would not be aware of the embedded grip Lado-Fries methods and Skinnerian psychology had on the profession, and the struggle it was to break free of that approach. I was involved in contracted programs, such as the Libyan nuclear engineers, and I knew that sponsors were demanding results that stimulus-response language teaching could not deliver. So there was pressure around the world for change, and the profession was responding to it. It was an exciting time to be a language teaching professional.

The influence of Lado and Fries, along with the "Michigan Method" was much stronger in the United States and on those who had trained in the U.S. In contrast, in Great Britain the leading authorities at that time were people like grammarian Randolph Quirk, applied linguists, Henry Widdowson and Peter Strevens, and lexicographer and materials writer, A.S. Hornby.

3. Final considerations

Here is the famous opening sentence of L.P.Hartley's novel, *The Go-between*: "The past is a different country; they do things differently there" (Hartley, 1953). Certainly in the second half of the 1970s the world was an analogue world. At the University of Khartoum, we had no office telephone and no access to a photocopier. Instead, we depended on manual typewriters, stencils, and the use of the Faculty of Science's duplicating machine. Fortunately, the Sudanese postal service at that time was quite efficient and largely reliable. But another famous quotation about the past occurs in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* when Antonio says "The past is prologue." In effect, rapid ESP developments of those years meant that the time was right for the launching of a peer-reviewed international scholarly journal devoted to English for Specific Purposes. Some of the people who made a major contribution to this resurgence, people like Tony Dudley-Evans, Ann Johns, Larry Selinker and Henry Widdowson, are well-known and well-remembered. One who is much less recognized is Karl Drobnic who in fact went on to have a successful career as an international educational consultant, and who has been the main protagonist of the story I have tried to tell in this short paper; indeed, he could be considered its hero. Reflect upon his creation of an ESP newsletter that appeared *monthly* for years, the first four formative years of which under his editorial control. Consider the fact that, according to his reckoning, there were about 50 copies made of the first issue, but this grew to about 400. Consider the effort made at Corvallis to establish a very impressive EST Clearinghouse and to make available, on a world-wide basis, items from this collection at cost. But most of all, recall what Karl wrote about the Clearinghouse at the 1978 TESOL convention:

> About 40 people attended the Clearinghouse report on Wednesday night. …In keeping with its policy of communication, the Clearinghouse kept its report short and devoted most of the time to getting those in attendance talking to each other.

So we see here a consummate but entirely self-effacing administrator and leader unobtrusively going about his business. And to return to where this paper began, it is not surprising that Karl Drobnic should also appear on the masthead of the first issue of *The ESP Journal* as Associate Editor.

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